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# IFAS EXTENSION

**Friday's Feature**

**By**

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## **Lawns need care during the winter**

One thing that's predictable about the weather in January is that it is unpredictable. Cycles of moderate temperatures, rain and cold fronts are common. Even though most of our lawns have gone dormant, some care is needed especially to prevent stress from the constantly changing weather.

Because most of our warm-season grasses have poor cold tolerance, it's important to continue to take care of your grass during its dormancy. Injury to our warm-season turfgrass often occurs when temperatures drop below 20 degrees F. In general, major winter injury to turfgrass is caused by tissue desiccation, direct low-temperature kill, diseases or effects of too much traffic.

Unfortunately, it's not until spring that we see the effects of low-temperature stress. The most frequent problem we encounter is a "dead spot" in the lawn. Spring dead spots are common. They can be caused by several factors and are very difficult to diagnosis correctly. The cause for spring dead spots can be due to low-temperature stress or lack of maintenance during the winter. One of the most important things to do during the dormancy period is to water correctly.

Any time one of the quick moving cold fronts comes through our area, consider irrigating the lawn. One of the more common reasons for grass to experience winter kill is severe desiccation. This can occur when a front moves through that has little moisture in it. When such a weather front is predicted, water long enough to deliver one-half inch of water at least twenty-four hours before the front.

Irrigation is also important when temperatures are predicted to dip dramatically. When temperatures are expected into the 20's, it is wise to irrigate the day before the sudden drop in temperature. A day full of sun on moist soils allows for extra warming at the roots and soil surface prior to the cold snap. This benefits grass roots by reducing the time the soil will be very cold.

At the time of a hard freeze, moisture in the soil benefits the grass in another way as well. If ice crystals start to form in the soil air spaces, and there is not enough moisture present, the grass roots will actually give up their moisture to the ice crystals. This is another type of root desiccation.

Grass roots continue to grow during our mild winters along the Gulf Coast and therefore should continue to receive water. From the time the grass growth significantly slows in the fall until the time it begins to grow in the spring, approximately mid-November until the end of February, be sure that the grass receives water. In the absence of sufficient rainfall, irrigate every seven to ten days.

On the other hand, too much water during the winter can also be a problem. During cooler temperatures, grass root growth slows down. However, the roots of many moisture-loving weeds (such as dollarweed) are stimulated by excessive moisture. Many weeds continue to grow during the winter when generous amounts of

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water are applied. These troublesome weeds can quickly out-compete the grass for root dominance. When the weather warms, the weeds will “explode” into rapid growth while the grass slowly comes out of its dormancy.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.